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Education

This Security Guard Enforced a School District's Mask Mandate. He Ended Up Facing a Criminal Charge.

by Nicole Carr

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Parents protested a mask mandate at a Webster, New York, school board meeting. After Ken Mancini tried to enforce the policy, a parent he ejected pressed charges for harassment.

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Jill Joy pointed her cellphone camera at the security guards gathered near the doors to the middle school auditorium, where the Webster Central School District Board of Education meeting was about to start. Panning the scene for her livestream viewers that cold evening in February 2022,



Joy was among a group of parents in suburban Rochester, New York, who dubbed themselves ROC for Educational Freedom. Two years earlier, in 2020, they'd created a Facebook group to organize against what they perceived as "drastic" and "deranged" COVID-19 safety measures in suburban Monroe County school districts. Then in the summer of 2021, Joy landed in a local news story when she stood before the Webster school board cupping her hand over her young daughter's mouth to mimic a mask. "If you saw this, you would see that this is abuse and you would stop it," she'd declared.

Now, as Joy livestreamed the scene, a handful of parents huddled with her just inside the entrance to the middle school. Dressed in jeans and puffy winter coats, they were trying to decide the best way to break the rule requiring that they wear masks to attend the meeting. "They're going to try to put us in a classroom and segregate us," one woman warned.

Ken Mancini, a retired jail officer turned school district security supervisor, was one of the guards captured on Joy's livestream. It was Mancini's job to enforce the state's mask mandate that evening. As Joy and the other parents approached him, one father, Dave Calus, asked, "Where are you keeping those segregated people?"

"In the room down the hallway," Mancini responded, pointing the unmasked parents in that direction.

Over the squeaking of the group's shoes on the hallway's shiny floors, Joy said: "When your children don't comply, this is their walk of shame to their classroom where they go into false imprisonment."

Almost as soon as the parents got to the room, they turned around to head back to the meeting, acting on an earlier suggestion to gain entry wearing masks and then take them off. "They're not going to arrest us all for trespassing, right?" one woman asked.

"Yeah, exactly," Calus responded.

"Let's go in and see," Joy said.

Less than a minute after they walked into the auditorium, Mancini started making rounds, asking people in the group who'd removed their masks to put them back on. One by one they ignored or argued with him. When one woman refused, Mancini picked up her cup and a stack of papers she'd set down on the staircase where she was seated. "That's it. Time to leave," he said, putting his hand on the woman's back and motioning for her to exit.

"Don't leave, make them call the police," Joy said as she livestreamed Mancini escorting the woman out.

Then, as a first grader was preparing to give a presentation about Lunar New Year traditions in Chinese culture, Mancini tapped Calus on the shoulder.

"I realized it was a setup after the evening ended," Mancini later recalled to ProPublica. "But at some point you have to do your job. Because if you ignore one, then you have to ignore them all."

with trespassing that night, but Mancini did wind up facing a criminal charge.

Mancini is among 59 people identified by ProPublica who were arrested or charged as a result of turmoil at school board meetings across the country from May 2021 to November 2022. While most of those people were parents or protestors who disrupted the meetings by railing against mask mandates, the teaching of “divisive” racial concepts and the availability of books with LGBTQ+ themes in school libraries, Mancini’s incident was different. It’s the only case ProPublica could find in which a member of a school district’s security team was charged for ejecting a parent from a school board meeting.

The Monroe County district attorney’s office did not answer ProPublica’s questions. Joy declined to be interviewed.

Calus and Mancini had crossed paths before. During a May 2021 school board budget hearing, Calus and other parents had yelled from the audience about there not being a public comment period — and Calus said that, as a result, Mancini and a police officer asked him to leave. He also said he did not believe Mancini had the authority to remove him and only complied because a police officer was involved.

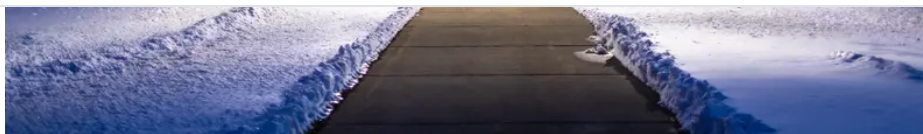
Calus told ProPublica that when he showed up at the February 2022 meeting, there wasn’t a preexisting agreement with the other parents to cause a scene or get someone in trouble. “We didn’t plan to meet together,” he said. “We didn’t conspire together.”

Tammy Gurowski, who was president of the Webster school board at the time of the February 2022 incident, recalled that in the months before the incident, board members paid attention to the grievances parents expressed on social media. “It wasn’t the majority, but it was a very angry, very frustrated minority,” she said.

She also said the board attempted to recognize the parents’ concerns and that board members were aware of the growing unrest at nearby school board meetings.

“I think for us as a board at that time, we just saw that it’s just fracturing the whole premise of what public education was designed to do — and that is, educate every child without all those issues at play.”





The Webster middle school where the Webster Central School District Board of Education had the February 2022 meeting Matt Burkhardt for ProPublica

Webster, a predominantly white, middle-class town of roughly 45,000 people, is among dozens of small towns in the U-shaped band of suburbs that surround Rochester. In that swath of Monroe County, small groups of organized parents have accused multiple school boards of indoctrination and creating unsafe conditions.

At a June 2021 meeting in nearby Penfield, a mother bemoaned the district's "scary" diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, suggested that the board was pushing a transgender agenda and told members to understand that the students "are God's children." A short time later, a father in the audience yelled that one of the board members should be respectful of parents. The board member yelled back, "You're not going to stand up here and do anything to me, asshole!" — prompting the father to jump on the stage and confront the school board member face-to-face.

In the months before the incident in Webster, four parents were arrested for disrupting other meetings in neighboring school districts. Charges against all four were dismissed.

In October 2021, in a suburb on the other side of Rochester, members of the Hilton Central School District board adjourned a meeting after asking the sheriff's office to assist with disruptive parents. One parent who refused to mask was charged with trespassing. Two others faced charges for refusing to leave the property. Parents would go on to lead an effort to ban a book with LGBTQ+ themes from the district. The superintendent would later say the book was cited in a bomb threat made against the district. Two similar anti-LGBTQ bomb threats followed. Agencies, including the FBI, concluded the threats were a hoax, sent anonymously from an overseas server.

In an incident similar to the one in Webster, a parent in nearby Fairport named Shannon Bones livestreamed her arrest at a school board meeting during which she'd kept her mask lowered. Bones later appeared on "The Megyn Kelly Show," where she alleged she had been singled out for arrest. She went on to claim that this particular meeting "was very different than previous meetings" because the board had "worked with" a group called Black in the Burbs and that the group had "brought in activists."

Immediately after that August 2021 meeting, there was a shouting match between two groups of parents in the parking lot. One group included Bones, who'd been released by police at the scene, and an opposing group coalesced around Tiffany Porter, the founder of Black in the Burbs. Porter said she had posted a photo of a young man on social media after, she alleged, he threatened her as a result of her activism, and the man's mother was with Bones in the parking lot. Bones denies having anything



You made it personal, often. You made it personal. The mother yelled in a video recorded by one of Porter's friends.

"I don't know who your son is," Porter replied.

"Go wear your mask!" another woman shouted after the groups continued their back-and-forth yelling.

"Go fuck yourself," Porter snapped back.

A prosecutor dropped trespassing charges against Bones within three weeks. But Bones continued to use the case as a rallying cry against government overreach, filing [a wrongful arrest lawsuit seeking \\$17 million in damages](#). The case is ongoing.

Bones told ProPublica that her arrest was "violent aggression" against parents attempting to exercise their rights: "I think we are somewhat in the middle of the righteous battle over who is going to control the education and upbringing of children."

Porter, a Black, queer woman who'd responded to George Floyd's murder by launching Black in the Burbs and organizing protests during the summer of 2020, says she was not plotting against Bones or working with the board. But she said she did expect trouble at meetings because online vitriol was flaring. "We were in and are still in a civil war when it comes to public education," she said.

At the February 2022 meeting in Webster, after Mancini tapped him on the shoulder, Calus didn't budge. Mancini then gripped the back of the rolling chair Calus was sitting on and tried to wheel it toward the exit. When Calus lunged forward, Mancini grabbed the back of his jacket.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Joy screamed as she kept livestreaming. "That's assault!"

Calus' coat slid off and he sat back in his chair. Mancini stepped in front of him, pointing to the door. Another security guard grabbed Calus as Mancini shoved the chair toward the exit. Three guards pushed Calus out of the auditorium.

The meeting continued as Joy and others yelled about Mancini's actions. "The cops should have arrested this fucking guy instead of them throwing Dave out," she said.

An attorney named Chad Hummel was at home watching Joy's livestream but had stepped away before the incident with Mancini. "In the meantime, my phone literally starts buzzing off the counter," he later recalled on a friend's podcast. "I'm getting text after text after text after text. I read my text messages, and somebody tells me that Dave Calus just got quote-unquote manhandled and dragged out of the place. So I immediately texted Dave."

Calus said he met Hummel in 2021 when the attorney offered his office as a meeting place for parents to give depositions in [a lawsuit they had filed against 15 local school districts over COVID-19 protocols](#), hoping to force

That year, Hummel started hosting a show on the We The People Podcast Network, a local platform of political programs that aims to “bring the right and the left together” and allow “both sides to present their similarities.” Yet Hummel’s show promised “to break down the hypocrisy of the left and fight for the right.” He would later tell his listeners that the FBI had questioned him about being at the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Prior to the incident involving Calus, Hummel had stepped in to represent a local woman who was arrested for confronting a school district employee over the masking policy. In that case, the woman faced charges for allegedly assaulting a school bus monitor who tried to make her son wear a mask. (Police said the woman also encouraged her child to punch the bus monitor; there’s no record of the outcome of the case.) Months before that, Hummel himself had been arrested in his own kid’s school district. He had refused to mask at his son’s baseball game and then refused to leave when security tried to escort him out for breaching district policy. He was charged with third-degree criminal trespass and was preparing for his own trial when Calus’ incident landed on his radar.

Hummel, who was later acquitted, did not respond to ProPublica’s questions.

Calus said that the night of the incident, Hummel recommended he call the Webster Police Department to press charges against Mancini and said that an officer came to his home to take a statement. The Webster Police Department did not respond to ProPublica’s questions.

Calus also said he’d wanted the media to cover the incident. He recalled that, though he’s a registered Democrat, “nobody on the left wanted to pick it up.” So he ended up on conservative programs. “I was willing to give interviews to anybody who was willing.”

The day after the incident, with Hummel at his side, Calus was a guest on a We The People Podcast Network show hosted by Hummel’s friend. Two days later, Calus and Hummel were featured guests on Greg Kelly’s show on NewsMax and the “Hannity” show on Fox News.

“There’s been political overreach and control over our kids for so long,” Calus told Sean Hannity. “And we haven’t been asking for a ban on masks. All we want is a choice. We deserve the right to choose whether our kids go to school with a mask or not.”

A week later, Hummel said he had an important announcement to make about the case on a “bonus” episode of his podcast: “My Information at this point is that Mr. Mancini was in fact charged today in Webster town court.” The Monroe County district attorney’s office had charged Mancini with second-degree harassment.

At around the time of Calus’ media appearances, Mancini and his family began receiving alarming messages on Facebook.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if your scumbag ass catches a beating,” one



Are you one of the people who showed up at the school board meeting, assaulting a peaceful taxpaying father?" said another message.

Mancini said he had to shut down his Facebook page because the messages kept coming. "They posted on different accounts that they were going to come by my house and do a citizen's arrest," he said. "I would get anonymous phone calls about different stuff. Got to the point I wasn't even answering my phone anymore unless I knew the person that was calling me."

Meanwhile, many people who'd watched Joy's livestream, which racked up 185,000 views, sympathized with Calus. In one of the 1,600 comments, one man compared him to Rosa Parks "who refused to give up her seat on a bus" and to anti-segregation student protestors who "quietly sat in at lunch counters while enduring all kinds of physical and verbal abuse."

In September 2022, Mancini arrived for his trial in Judge David Corretore's courtroom. He was represented by the high-profile defense attorney Joe Damelio, a childhood friend who had previously defended several politicians charged with federal crimes.

The trial lasted two and a half hours. The judge found Mancini not guilty of harassing Calus.

Details of the trial and the case are scarce. Damelio did not respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for the Monroe County district attorney's office stated that court and police documents had been sealed, consistent with New York law, because Mancini was acquitted. After an initial interview with ProPublica, Mancini declined further comment, referring interview requests to his employer, the Webster Central School District. The district did not respond to repeated requests for an interview or to written questions.

Calus said he was disappointed by the outcome of the case. "It's not like I wanted Ken to go to jail," he said. "But I would have thought the judge would have said, 'Yeah, you know what, Dave, you didn't deserve that. Your rights were violated. We're gonna give Ken a slap on the hand.' But realistically, that's not what happened."

Calus never publicly acknowledged the acquittal, which received no media coverage.

"My ex-wife tells me every once in a while, 'I ran into so-and-so and they still think that you're a loser for what you did in 2022.' And I just didn't need that shadow following me everywhere, constantly," Calus said of his silence after the case.

But Calus briefly returned to the public eye. This year, he ran for a seat on the Webster Central School District board. He lost his bid in May.

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